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HUMOR: ITS KINSFOLK AND ACQUAINTANCE.

BY CHAUNCEY B. BREWSTER.

IN the "Spectator" Addison describes the god of wit, "who bore several quivers on his shoulders, and grasped several arrows in his hand," and who marched on the right hand of the goddess of truth. Thus he pictures together wit and truth. A closer friend of truth is humor, whereof Addison here says naught, but which is often associated with wit. Wit and humor seem like near neighbors. Indeed, the two are akin. Time was when wit was wont to look down on humor as a homely, shabby sister quite unfit for fine company. But this despised Cinderella at last got her own footing and the slipper that fitted only her, and has been coming to her own. There is a kinship, and it lies in the sense of the incongruous. Wit makes connection with the discrepant or contrary so as to get an electric shock of surprise; while the sphere of humor also is found in the contradictions, misfits, things queerly crooked or awry, the oddities and illusions confronting one.

Wit and humor are by no means, however, one and the same, or even twins closely resembling each other. There is plainly a distinction to be recognized between them. The distinction between the two is suggested by the etymology of the words. Wit—compare "to wit," German *wissen*—is the intellect at play. John Locke, in his chapter treating "Of Discerning and other Operations of the Mind," speaks of "Wit lying most in the assemblage of ideas." The word "humor," originally signifying a moisture or fluid of the body, is applied to a temper or disposition of the soul. It means juice or juiciness of nature. In wit the intellectual predominates: in humor, the moral. Wit implies a penetrating perception that sees into a thing: humor, a sympathy that feels with one. Wit aims its shaft at an object: humor smiles and

laughs with one. Wit lies more in verbal collocation: humor rather in the atmosphere or the spirit. Brevity is the soul of wit; the quality of humor is a slow and leisurely play. Wit produces the sparkling gem: humor discloses the vein of gold. Wit coruscates in quick flashes that electrify like mimic lightning: humor, like the sunshine, bathes things in its radiance. In wit is more of instantaneous illumination; but more of warmth and glow in humor.

The humorous is sometimes mistaken for mere facetiousness and is made equivalent to "funny." But it is a degenerate humor which is merely comic. It loses the name of humor if it be witless; yet it is more than wit. George Eliot defined wit as "reasoning raised to the highest power." Humor is not in so close relations with the understanding. It has not even a bowing acquaintance with logic, which it usually is either at variance with or utterly ignores, and is likely to be quite illogical. One of our College Presidents, when in Rome, desiring to see a particular function at St. Peter's, at the door was informed that a special card of admission was necessary. "But surely," said he, "I am entitled to admission." "Why so?" "Because of my name." "What is your name, sir?" "My name is Luther." The reply struck the fancy of the official, proved an open sesame, and procured one of the highest seats.

Not only will humor not be found to be a tenant of the premises of logic, but often, like an unlooked-for apparition, it rises from the nether region of the subconscious. Many, I dare say, can vaguely recall the strangely incongruous situations and the whimsical suggestions of dreams. The absence of rational self-governance may release humor. For example, it is sometimes in intoxication set free to play and run riot. Of Scotch humor Sydney Smith said that there was needed a little operating to let it out, and he knew of no instrument so effectual for the purpose as the corkscrew. Its effectiveness is not confined to the Scotch. A very dignified friend of mine met the son of an old family servant. The fellow was happy through strong drink and said: "Mr. —, I never can quite remember whether it was my mother that worked for your mother or your mother that worked for my mother." He felt an exhilarating sense of a common humanity lifting him quite above any social distinctions or barriers. Holding no intercourse with logic, humor is more

likely to be found in the company of fancy and imagination. It is a not distant relative of theirs, being itself more constructive and creative than wit and not practised in the latter's keen, cutting analysis.

While wit must have its point, humor is usually without sharp point or edge. Wit may sting with the bite of scorn, the venom of malignance. Humor is characteristically genial and humane. In humanity it finds an habitual associate, and, if true to itself, fails not to manifest some feeling and regard for what is human. Wit may forge weapons of irony and satire. But, if the satire be kindly, then wit passes into humor because of the human touch, even although that human touch be only light and superficial. An instance is the well-known interview when William Penn stood before Charles II. If that monarch, according to Lord Rochester's epigram,

"Never said a foolish thing
And never did a wise one,"

he sometimes acted by a happy inspiration. Penn, as a Quaker, kept his hat on in the royal presence, whereupon Charles took off his own. "Friend Charles," said Penn, "why dost thou not keep on thy hat?" "'Tis the custom of this place," replied the king, "for only one person to remain covered." There, I take it, was the spirit of fun passing into a phase of whimsical sympathy that, while asserting distinctions, let the Quaker keep his hat on.

Humor means far more than the laughter of a fool or at one. It goes often hand in hand with compassion. It is always sane and clear-eyed, and none the less so for its kindly smile and thrill of sympathy as it contemplates the follies, foibles, and faults of men. In the sympathy lies its kinship and acquaintance with pathos. But it is the sanity, the clear-sightedness, of humor that keeps the pathos from degenerating into bathos or anything that could be described as maudlin. Humor is on the best of terms with sentiment, so long as it is true and healthy. When, however, feelings have passed from their natural spontaneousness into a secondary stage where they have become self-conscious, are called out for drill and marshalled for parade, then sentiment has degenerated into sentimentality. Genuine humor is too loyal a friend of truth to have anything to do with such artificiality or to associate with sentimentality. At once it

is suspicious and becomes shy and reserved. Take, in Sterne's "Sentimental Journey," the familiar episode of the dead donkey and the mourner's weeping and wailing: "It was not the value of the ass, but the loss of him." Alas, poor Yorick! a fellow of infinite jest, but undeniably a sentimentalist and, by that same token, not a genuine humorist. Was it not the verdict of such a judge as Thackeray: "a great jester, not a great humorist"?

Genuine humor shrinks with holy horror from anything that is morbid, shunning its infection, seeking escape out-of-doors into the fresh air and sunshine of mirth. Thus humor may find its refuge in jest and jollity even over human frailty. "Pat!" said the priest, "how's this? You've been drunk again? Don't you remember the pledge you signed?" "Yes, your rivirince! But, sure, all signs fail in dry times!" There is not exactly the note of Lamb's "Confessions of a Drunkard"! Yet with the Irish often the smiles are not far from the tears; and it is the very sensitiveness to the pathetic that is the key to much of their rich humor. Hard by, one feels the presence of the sad and the tragic. Nor, indeed, in this are the Irish alone or exceptional. Although loathing the morbid, humor is fond of the mood of thoughtfulness that is not blind to the contradictions and defeats and failures of life, nor deaf to "the still, sad music of humanity," nor insensible of

. . . "the burden of the mystery,
Of all this unintelligible world."

It is evident humor requires and implies a certain detachment of mind, not to take the episode in such wise as to be lost in it, but to be sufficiently aloof to view the particular matter, not by itself alone, but in relation to a larger whole. That humorist, Touchstone, after summing up the pros and cons of shepherd life, says: "Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?" Genuine humor *is*, consciously or unconsciously, philosophic. Thus its close companion is a thoughtful seriousness, although this companion is not recognized by the many to whom humor is known as mere levity. By such people, it is in proportion as one is dull that he is taken seriously. Mark Twain has lamented to friends "that his reputation as a humorist had stood in the way of people's believing that he ever meant what he said." It was Thackeray's grave assertion that the humorous writer "takes upon himself to be the week-day preacher, so to speak."

Where there is genuine humor, moral earnestness is not far away. As an illustration take a soliloquy in *Macbeth*. It is the murder scene. Upon that false, unnatural dreamland of cruel crime breaks in an interrupting summons from God's world of reality, in the knocking heard. It rouses the porter, who shambles in, half awake, half dreaming he is porter of hell-gate. "Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i' the name of Belzebub? Here's a farmer that hanged himself on the expectation of plenty. Come in time: . . . here you'll sweat for't.—Knock, knock! Who's there, i' the other devil's name? . . . Knock, knock, knock! Who's there? Faith, here's an English tailor come hither, for stealing out a French hose. Come in, tailor; here you may roast your goose.—Knock, knock; never at quiet! What are you?—But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further: I had thought to have let in some of all professions, that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire." The dreamy, drowsy whim of hell's gate, in juxtaposition with hellish murder, may illustrate humor with a background of most serious reality.

Or take again, near the end of *Cymbeline*, the humor of the gaoler summoning Posthumus to be hanged: "Look you, sir, you know not which way you shall go." "Yes, indeed do I, fellow." "Your death has eyes in's head then; I have not seen him so pictured: you must either be directed by some that take upon them to know; or take upon yourself that which I am sure you do not know; for, jump the after-inquiry on your own peril, and how you shall speed in your journey's end, I think you'll never return to tell one." Or recall the story of Falstaff's last hours told by Mrs. Quickly: "Nay, sure, he's not in hell: he's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. . . . for after I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with flowers, and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way: for his nose was sharp as a pen, and 'a babbled of green fields.'" "*How now, Sir John?* quoth I: *What, man! be of good cheer.* So 'a cried out: *God, God, God!* three or four times: now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God: I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet." What a picture! That kindly, commonplace comforter of poor frail humanity standing out against, as in a Rembrandt etching, the shadow of death!

Indeed, behind true humor, howsoever dimly discerned and undefined, is some kind of philosophy of life. Its assumptions may be optimistic or at least melioristic. If so, the humor will be perhaps reverent to observe "some soul of goodness in things evil," at any rate, cheerful, and, it may be, even tenderly sympathetic. The assumptions of this latent philosophy may, on the other hand, be pessimistic. Then we may see the humorist, as it were, performing on a tight-rope of wit stretched over a yawning abyss of pessimism. Certain strongly marked varieties of humor may be accounted for largely by the standpoint taken and the view of things in general. The philosophy of life may pervert the humor, which thus may become soured. A very small amount of the dregs of pessimism may act as a kind of mother to turn to vinegar the sweet and kindly juice of humor. It may in like manner be converted into very vitriol that bites and eats into the object of scorn, as did the *saeva indignatio* of Swift, mighty genius, but himself, in his minanthropy, most wretched of men.

By reason of this connection with the serious and ideal, humor may be found in the highest company, in that of poetry, for example, although its free play is often too wanton to submit to the restraint of poetic form. Then, too, the presence of humor must depend on the nature of the man gifted with the vision and the faculty divine. Dante, in his awesome journey, was too solitary,

"Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone," and was too intense in his gaze upon things not of this world, to allow of the play of humor. For it, again, Milton dwelt too much apart, although some acquaintance therewith is manifested in "L'Allegro." Wordsworth took himself and his mission too seriously, not to say solemnly: his sense of humanity, moreover, was too thin and abstract, a matter of theory not of vital experience. The faintest whisper of humor, in friendly warning, would have saved him from leaving to posterity, along with some of the noblest verse in the English language, such lines as these:

"Once more the Ass, with motion dull,
Upon the pivot of his skull
Turned round his long left ear."

With lofty epic or passionate lyric we might not expect to find humor associated, but rather with dramatic poetry. Not now to speak of Shakspere, take Goethe's Faust. Here is a robust

sense of humanity. In the scene "Before the City-Gate," at sight of the Sunday pleasure-seeking throng, is voiced the fellow feeling with the children of men:

"Hier bin ich Mensch, hier darf ich's sein,"
("Here I am Man,—dare Man to be").

The humor of the poem, however, is concentrated in Mephistopheles. There is a pathetic touch of tenderness in recalling to Margaret her childhood's hours in church, and her prattle of prayers:

"Halb kinderspiele
Halb Gott im Herzen,"
("Half child's play, half God in the heart").

But in Mephistopheles it is not good humor, it is the humor of evil. It frolics in reckless wantonness. In the Classical Walpurgis-Night the nudity of the antique offends his scruples:

"Doch das Antike find' ich zu lebendig,"
("But the Antique is too lifelike for me").

This might be a satire of to-day upon Anthony Comstock! It is always the humor of evil, satiric, sarcastic, and mocking, sometimes sardonic and as biting and vitriolic as Swift's. It is so because it is aloof from, and at enmity against, humanity and human life. This Margaret intuitively detects. She ungrammatically complains of Mephistopheles:

"Man sieht, dass er an nichts keinen Anteil nimmt,"
("One sees that he takes no interest in nothing").

Another type of humor we find, for example, in Burns. He is outspokenly defiant in his freedom. Yet we feel him to be "a man for a' that." If there is biting satire, there is also the sympathy, as there is the pathos, of genuine humanity.

Of practical interest is the question concerning the association of humor with will-power. It has been held to be usually not compatible with force of will nor favorable to greatness in action. Lincoln's humor is unquestioned. A recent writer finds him in respect to this characteristic an exceptional instance of a great man. Certainly Lincoln's humor did not paralyze his power of resolution. "Wrapt in a most humorous sadness," he accomplished the Emancipation. It is true the sense of humor may give us pause and sometimes hold one back from a hasty initiative. It is a sense not possessed by the typical fanatic, who

often does things he would not do if he have it. It may also put a check upon any overweening selfish ambition. On the other hand, humor's kinship with sympathy means alertness to human need and elicits one's interest away from self. It might save one from that despondent moodiness which plays with fancied and fantastic ills and which threatens paralysis of will. Humor abides not self-pity and works deliverance therefrom, meeting events with a front face and going forward in company with a brave patience, smiling at grief.

Humor, as we have noted, keeps no company with fanaticism, and is none the less to be esteemed for that. She is not likely to associate with anger or jealousy or any violent or insane passion. She is a foe to excess in any direction. Her habit is to "see life steadily and see it whole," not to see double, but to see the two sides of the same thing with sane, clear-eyed vision. While she has naught to do with the pessimism that despairs, she goes not the length of an unreasonable optimism that shuts its eyes to what comes short or crooked. She is well acquainted with complacent self-satisfaction and conceit and arrogance and the sisterhood bearing the family likeness of pretentiousness, be it of purse-pride or pedantry or pedigree, but endures to be in their company only long enough to puncture the inflation and expose the sham. She takes not herself too seriously nor thinks of herself more highly than she ought to think. From the vulgarity, which means lack of simplicity and ignoble content with low standards or no standards, she has her safeguard in those standards and ideals in measurement wherewith the actual falls so incongruously short.

Humor dwells with sanity and common sense and truth. Her sisters are sympathy and humanity. Beside her walks a noble seriousness. The mentor whose influence she obeys is a veiled reverence for certain ideals. Her close companions and friends are generous tolerance and magnanimity and that divine charity which vaunteth not herself, is not puffed up, doth not behave herself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil.

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